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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the way in which different programs deal with the often conflicting requirements for structure and individual freedom in preschool education. Several programs were observed and evaluated. Background issues discussed include the issue of whether teachers or children determine which activities will be undertaken; the distinction between teacher- and child-centered activities; the distinction between academic and nonacademic activities; and the requirements for structure as determined by the needs of children, teachers, and the activity content. The research plan, which consisted of observations to be made by students of early childhood, is discussed. Anecdotal results of the observations are presented. From the observations, it was clear that no one method of instruction was completely superior to others. (BC)

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STRUCTURE AND FREEDOM IN SELECTED PRE-SCHOOL PROGRAMS

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Structure and Freedom in Pre-School Programs

Instructors who work with pre-schoolers are aware of the individual development pace of children and the fact that they learn best when permitted to learn within that development pace. At the same time these teachers know that children need a certain amount of structure. In addition, school systems with which pre-schools are connected often have clearly specified competencies that must be completed before children are permitted to move on.

This study, part of a course in Early Childhood for prospective teachers, attempted to come to terms with the way different programs work within these two often-conflicting requirements. Several programs were observed and evaluated to see how much emphasis was placed on structure or on autonomy on the part of the child. The purpose was to help the prospective teachers determine for themselves ways to cope with both their knowledge of child psychology and the demands of the system within which they will work.

Who Determines the Activities?

It was immediately obvious that there are wide differences in the ways various classrooms are conducted. The questions asked during the observations began with the following: How structured is the situation? How much freedom does the child actually have?

In order to respond to these questions one has to start from the beginning. Who determines the activities? Is it the teacher or the child? In general, certainly, it must be the teacher, unless there is going to be a totally unstructured classroom where the children come in and do whatever they want at any time during the day. But such programs are rare and probably not desirable. Even when these programs exist, the teacher would still have made some determination by the fact that the materials that are available are selected by her.

Overall, then, the teacher, even in rather free classrooms, determines which activities will be available to the child. However, the question persists -- given the materials and availability of activities -- who determines when the child shall use them and for how long? In some pre-schools, the children are put through a rather structured program. They move from center to center or play area to play area at specified times, determined by the teacher. Each morning they are given their assignments for the day.

In other programs the children help the teacher plan the activities and choose which of them they want to do that day. Once they make a decision, however, they must stick to it. In a few other programs, they may just move from place to place as they wish, spending as little or as much time as they please.

Teacher-centered or Child-centered Activities?

The next question to be asked is: who do the activities center around, the teacher or the children? Certain activities

must center around a teacher. Examples of such activities are reading to children, or learning a new song, or dance as a group. In these activities, the teacher is the center of attention. All eyes are to be focused on her and the activity could not go on without her. Activities which center around the children are art work, sand box play, water table, and so forth. These activities are initiated, carrried out, and even evaluated by the children themselves. In these activities, the teacher serves as a sort of background person, watching, helping when needed, and giving support. But the children continue with the work whether she is there or not.

Academic or Non-academic Activities?

The next question to be asked is how academically-oriented are the activities. A false dichotomy has arisen between activities which are considered academic and those which are not. The following are labeled academic activities and they are defined as those most like activities of a regular school program: reading pre-skills, writing pre-skills, the learning of numbers, science activities, and health skills. Non-academic activities then include such activities as creative and free play, art, music, and games, as well as the training and practice given in manners and social behavior. The fallacy of this division is that children learn from these creative activities just as much and perhaps even more effectively than they do from the so-called academic work.

The more the activities in the pre-school resemble those

that are performed in regular school, that is, the more academic they are, the more need there is for structure and the less freedom children are permitted. If one's goals are to have all children master the alphabet or to read a Dr. Seuss book, then they cannot be allowed to pick and choose which letters or words they will learn.

If activities are highly academic in nature with goals clearly established then one knows exactly when those goals have been attained. A child is able to be tested on them in one way or another. In some pre-school children are tested at the end and that test determines whether or not they will be able to advance to the next stage or program or to the first grade. Such tests may be oral or written or performance, but they are tests and definitely require some kind of structure.

How much structure is required?

How much structure is required in a school is determined by questions such as these:

1. The needs of the children. How much structure do these children need? How much do they want? Or perhaps, how much can they endure?

It seems very clear that almost all children need some structure. Children often imagine they would like chaos and disorder, but in fact, they hate it. They want some order in their lives. Abraham Maslow, in his hierarchy of needs, included the need for order. Children, without being able to verbalize it, know that they want some kind of order. Some of

them come from homes where there is little order: meals are served haphazardly; bedtime varies on how much parents or babysitters are aware of the fact that the child is still up; things are not taken care of the way they should be. These children yearn for some kind of order in their lives and when they come into a classroom where everything is systematic and under control, it pleases them. Such order and structure gives them a sense of security. Things are the way, they would say, they are supposed to be. Somebody is taking care of what needs to be taken care of.

Further, some children have been taught so little personal self-control that they will not be able to function in a classroom which allows too much freedom. They will simply flit from one activity to another, quitting anything which requires effort, losing interest in one thing as soon as another attracts them. These children have a great need for order, both for their self-development and for the sake of the other children whom they will bother if they are not controlled.

2. The needs of the teacher. Each teacher has his or her own personality and some can handle more freedom in a classroom than others. Some are highly organized and are uncomfortable when things are not under control. They "run a tight ship" as the saying goes. Others can tolerate much more looseness, flexibility, and freedom. If one is too highly organized, too rigid and unbending, one will find teaching young children rather traumatic because children never operate in robot-fashion. On the other hand, if one is too loose,

children themselves, as has been indicated, will be unhappy with the lack of order and control. All teachers need to find what they are comfortable with and what they can handle. It must be remembered that if teachers themselves are frustrated, the classroom will not be a happy place for the children.

3. The needs of the content. There are activities which require a great deal more order than others. Thus a highly academic program requires much more structure than one that is not so highly academic. When children are doing art work they can be allowed much greater flexibility both in what they are producing and in how they do it, than they can when they are making little books about their families.

Plan of Observation

With all of this as background, several classrooms of pre-schoolers were observed by the students of Early Children at the college they were attending. As they observed classrooms, they tried to judge how free or how structured a program is.

The following items were considered clues.

1. What do you see when you first enter the empty classroom? Is the room all set up with various activities? Are there learning centers? At the centers are there a variety of possible activities? Are there detailed instructions for the use of each center?

It is interesting that if there is nothing is set up, that could mean one of two very opposite things: the classroom

is totally teacher-controlled because all activities will be determined by the teacher throughout the day. Most of them will be teacher-centered. On the other hand, the exact opposite could be true. The children could totally set the pace through the course of the day. No centers or other activities set up could mean that nothing has been planned at all. It could even indicate total chaos.

Ordinarily when centers are set up that means that children will be required or encouraged to use or try them and may or may not be free to use them as they wish. Centers usually mean that children work somewhat on their own at their own speed. Thus this kind of classroom set-up means a certain amount of freedom and a certain amount of teacher control; after all, she determined which centers would be there to start with.

2. What happens when the children first arrive? Do they immediately start on some pre-arranged, pre-planned, or routine activity or may they use that time freely?

3. Are most of the activities group activities or individual activities? If children are working at centers, even though several may be around a table together, those are usually individual activities, unless they are doing a project together. When the teacher has all of the children in a large circle or standing together and singing or moving, those, of course, are group activities. Such group activities are teacher-controlled to a great degree. Individual activities may or may not be teacher-controlled.

4. Are children involved in planning? If this is

really indicative of freedom, it must mean real planning on the part of the children, not just listening while the teacher tells the children what they will be doing that day.

5. Are children free to choose or not choose certain activities? If they must do each activity, can they do it in any order? If they move from center to center, can they spend as long or as short a time at each one as they choose?

6. Are there any activities at which the teacher is notably absent?

7. Are there any activities which do not go on without the presence of the teacher? In most classrooms, even rather free ones, there are some such activities. In others, highly structured ones, there are very many such actitivies. If the teacher is not there, not much goes on.

8. How are the following handled?

-- Conflicts between individual children

-- Problems of children being unable to perform various activities

-- Setting out materials

-- Cleaning up and putting away of materials

In each of these cases, the role of the teacher may be varied. For example, are children expected to develop skills in handling their own interpersonal problems? If children are unable (at first) to perform various activities, does a teacher (a) do it for them, (b) help them with it, or (c) allow them to continue trying either until they master the activity or until they are too frustrated to go on.

In a classroom that is highly teacher-oriented, the

teacher will assume full responsibility for setting out of materials as well as making sure they are put away. In a classroom that is more child-centered, children will be given these responsibilities.

Comments on Individual programs observed

As the students observed classrooms, they used an anecdotal approach. The following are some of their descriptions, showing patterns which ranged from highly controlled to much looser:

Class of four-year-olds:

"When I first came in they were making fall trees. Four or five children at a time made a tree....The teacheer cut out the trees. The child put glue on one side. The teacher turned the tree over on the paper and pressed it down. Then the teacher put dots of glue where the leaves went. The child placed the leaves on the glue dots. When they had finished, they went to play and the next group was called."

Kindergarten:

"Her day begins with opening songs of the calendar, month, and days.... Center time is conducted in the way that when the children finish their work at the center the teacher rings the bell and they are to sit in the middle of the room on

an outlined square. The teacher then instructs the children to go to the next assigned center. There is absolutely no freedom for the child to wander about and the only type of freedom is when the children are playing in the centers, but only the block and sand centers."

Kindergarten:

"A typical morning for this particular group starts off with announcements on the T.V., followed by circle time where the children sing songs, participate in doing the calendar and weather charts, show-and-tell, and have story-time. During story time the teacher reads a book which corresponds with the letter sound being studied for the day. Centers are then explained and at 10:00 am the children go to the centers according to the color bear group that they belong to. On this day, there were a mystery story with a filmstrip in the listening center, McDonald's in the play center, painting with milk in the painting center, and a memory game in the work center. The aide and teacher respectively assisted in the latter two centers. Each group spent about 15 minutes in each center."

Pre-school:

"My observation was done during a 'rhymes' lesson. The teacher would begin a nursery rhyme and then the children would join in on the parts they knew. For each nursery rhyme, she

used the felt board, changing it each time a part in the rhyme would change.

"Just from observing the children for this short time, I could tell that they were used to a structured and disciplined environment. For example, she'd tell them they were too close. They'd all say, "Three scooches back, scooch, scooch, scooch.

"Toward the end, she allowed them to choose between a couple of rhymes or to do one of the other ones again."

Kindergarten:

"I went first thing in the morning so the kids were arriving when I was there. Right away they were given choices of what to do before it was time for announcements. They could read books, play with blocks and toys, play in the kitchen or just freely talk with their peers. They had about fifteen minutes of this free-play depending on when they arrived. The teacher rang the bell so they all sat on the floor in front of the T.V. to watch the announcements. After the announcements and pledge of allegiance, the teacher talked to them very casually letting them comment whenever they raised their hands. Then she read them a story, which they were very attentive for. After that they had learning centers which they rotated in....One station was a cooking lesson, another drawing and coloring, and the other a stitching lesson."

Results of Project

In a short research project such as this it is impossible to give any long-range results. One thing is abundantly clear: there is no one method that is completely superior to all other methods. Americans value very highly individual freedom and there is a certain tradition among early childhood workers of giving children freedom. But all such freedom is limited. The time-honored concept of "a free child in a structured environment" is still alive. But, as has been seen, some children cannot handle freedom wisely.

Ultimately, each teacher will need to make his or her own decision based on considerations of requirements of the children, the subject, and the teacher himself or herself.

The End